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State panel postpones action on Big Springs

By ADELLA HARDING - Staff Writer

ELKO — The Nevada Environmental Commission this morning adjourned a hearing for 90 days on pollution allegations over the closed Big Springs Mine in Elko County to seek legal clarification of a new law.

"They stayed the hearing for 90 days and will be requesting an attorney general's opinion on the law," Nevada Division of Environmental Protection spokesman Dante Pistone said.

The commission met in Carson City today to consider an appeal Great Basin Mine Watch filed against NDEP over closure permits for AngloGold Ashanti's Big Springs property.

"We're very satisfied with that decision, and we think it is a prudent way to go to get the law clarified," Pistone said.

NDEP moved last week to block Great Basin Mine Watch's appeal of the closure permit because of Senate Bill 428, which states that only financial stakeholders can file appeals.

"It was not our intent to frustrate public involvement," Pistone said. "Once we get the attorney general's opinion, we can get down to discussing the merits of the case," he said.

The Associated Press talked this week with the lobbyist who pushed the bill, Jim Wadhams, who said he didn't envision the law as a means to stop environmental organizations from filing appeals.

He said he pushed the bill on behalf of independent insurance agents, and he said the mining industry wasn't involved in the effort to pass the bill.

"I'm not sure this should stop a public interest group from being able to challenge the work of an agency," Wadhams told AP. "Great Basin simply has to find a downstream farmer" whose crops are threatened by pollution, he said.

Great Basin Mine Watch said NDEP failed to deal with continuing discharges of polluted water into the north fork of the Humboldt River from the closed gold mine.

Pistone said Tuesday AngloGold Ashanti has taken remedial measures, and tests showed no impact to fish.

AngloGold Ashanti maintained ownership of the closed mine when it sold its 70 percent share of the Jerritt Canyon Mine to Queenstake Resources Ltd. Meridian Gold sold the other 30 percent to Queenstake.

Previous Jerriitt Canyon owners also operated Big Springs. Both sites are north of Elko in the Independence Mountains.

-- CLOSE WINDOW --